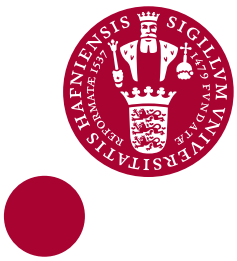

Divine Women

On young female middle class Bharatanatyam dancers in Delhi

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Spiritual practices and economic realities: Feminist challenges

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Institut za etnologiju i folkloristiku
Zagreb, 2011

STINE SIMONSEN PURI

DIVINE WOMEN: ON YOUNG FEMALE MIDDLE CLASS BHARATANATYAM DANCERS IN DELHI

A short introduction to Bharatanatyam

According to Hindu mythology, *Shiva* was the first dancer of what was later to become Bharatanatyam. He was asked by *Brahma* to dance for a group of gods and goddesses. They were all so pleased by his performance that he was requested to ensure that humans would learn his dance in order to continuously entertain the gods (Rangacharya 1996:2). When Shiva's wife *Parvati* copied her husband's dance, she danced in a very soft and feminine way, and this was similarly appreciated. Shiva and Parvati then instructed a sage by the name of *Bharata Muni* in the masculine (*tandava*) as well as the feminine (*lasya*) movements. He was asked to pass on this knowledge of the dance to humanity by writing a text with the specification of the enactment of the stories of the gods and goddesses, a text which at the same time was intended to educate people with divine knowledge through entertainment (Rangacharya 1996:xxi). Bharata Muni is said to be the author of the *Natya Sastra* written around the 2nd AD, a book on theater and dance techniques still read by dancers today.

Historically, the first signs of a dance practice resembling present day *Bharatanatyam* was in the South Indian areas of *Tamil Nadu* during the 5th century (Gaston 2005:27; Kersenboom 1989). The dancers, now known as the *Devdasis*, were connected to village temples where they would dance

daily in front of statues of temple deities as well as outside the temples during processions. The dancer was ritually married to the temple deity for whom she did many daily chores, of which an important one was dancing for their pleasure. Through a second ceremony, a patron (often royalty or wealthy landowner) would be selected for her. After the ceremony the Devdasi was to perform in her patron's court or home to entertain him in addition to her ritual dance in the temple (Gaston 2005:40). The Devadasi tradition peaked in the 17th and 18th century, when they were generaously supported by the royal court of Thanjavur. During this time there were Devadsis who even owned their own land, and enjoyed a certain amount fo freedom as they were not married to 'common' men.

However, as power structures shifted with the growing power of the British in th 19th century, the prestige of the Devdasis declined as they were less supported by the court. Gradually they as entertainers outside of the temples became associated with prostitution. This eventually lead to the introduction of the Devdasi Bill of 1947, in which dance was banned as part of temple rituals in Tamil Nadu (Gaston 2005:80).

During the same time a number of upper class *Brahmins* in *Madras* started calling for a revival of the dance (Gaston 2005:81). By then the dance was reinterpreted for stage performance by non-Devdasis and was named Bharatanatyam. As part of this revival of the dance, the dance itself moved from the villages to the cities, where a number of dance institutes where founded. Today, Bharatanatyam has spread from Tamil Nadu to all the larger cities where thousands of students are learning from both private teachers and at dance institutes.

Bharata means India and *natya* means dance in Sanskrit, a name given to the dance previously called sadir, during the revival of the dance. Today Bharatanatyam is considered one of nine national dances in India. The dance consists both of purely rythmic (*nritta*) parts as well as narrative parts. The narrative dance (*natya*) depicts stories from hindu mythology as well as the relationship between the gods and their devotees.

In 2005 while an MA student of anthropology in Copenhagen, I enrolled as a dance student in one of the dance institutes of Delhi. For seven months I came daily to learn the dance and to talk to the dancers, in order to understand the significance of the dance for young middle class women (before marriage) in an urban environment. In the following I wish to bring out the signifiance of the spiritual element in the dance and how this may become empowering for women in a setting which is primarily male dominated. It is important to note that the significance of the dance

is dependent on the life circumstances, related to gender, class, age and location of each dancer, and is not as such inherent in the dance. However, it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss these axes of inequality as I focus on a specific segment of dancers, who are those dominating the field of Bharatanatyam in numbers and in the level to which they are exposed to the dance at nationally recognised stages.

The paper is divided into two parts. In the first part I illustrate how dance when implied as a methodology in academic work, can overcome a clear distinction between faith and knowledge. The second part consists of observations on how Bharatanatyam dance affects the dancers experience of her position in society, and basically empowers her.

Dancing to know

Fredrik Barth, in a study on the cosmology of New Guinea, has argued that cosmology should not be understood as an ordered whole existing independently of its producers. Cosmology should be approached as a living tradition of knowledge (Barth 1987:86). People partake in the production of cosmos by constantly integrating personal experiences into their conception of cosmos (Barth 1987:87). In this line I see the practice of Bharatanatyam as a practice of generating a cosmos in which they can move close to the divine. The dancers relationship to Hindu gods and goddesses, is not based on belief or faith but on personal expereinces with the gods and goddesses through the embodiment of both the gods as well as their devotees, an experience that overcomes distinctions between the sacred and the mundane.

The best way of unfolding this statement I believe is by giving more insight into the methodology which brought me to an understanding of the cosmos in which the dancers move. A methodology which not only opened up for my understanding of the dance, but also a sense of the levels of reality in which people moved around me in India as well as elsewhere.

Richard Schechner, a Professor of Performance Studies, has pointed out that whereas academics have mainly dealt with performing arts from the point of view of the performance, people working within the arts have mainly dealt with the learning process (Schechner 1985:16). Also within anthropology, dance has primarily been studied in its finished form (in a performance situation) rather than through the coming into being of dance (in the dance practice). One reason might be that anthropologists first of all have been interested in the interrelationship between dance and society. As a consequence, the focus has directly or indirectly been put on the function

of dance in relation to society. This is either a function for the dancers as a form of communication, or a function for the society as a form of integration (Reed 1998, Spencer 1985, Hanna 1996).

My approach was more phenomenological and existential. I was first of all interested in what the dance did to the dancers. I was working with the assumption that dance is a way of exploring life. This was inspired by my supervisor Kirsten Hastrup's work on Shakespeare theatre. I believe her assumptions on theatre may easily be transferred to dance, especially in the case of Bharatanatyam as it is not only abstract movements, but also a form of dance theatre. Hastrup claims that theatre is not a metaphor of life, but life itself (Hastrup 2004a:19). The important point that Hastrup makes is that even though we may be able to distinguish between life and art, there is no ontological difference between the two as art is a way of living (Hastrup 2004a:313). Thinking beyond those distinction in this particular field brought me to challenging distinctions between the sacred and the profane, knowledge and belief as well as subject and object.

The point is that dance was a unique opportunity for me to expereince the realtionship one can have to Hindu gods and goddesses. By learning to embody Shiva and show love for Krishna, I got an insight into Hinduism which was not based on written information, peoples explanations, but on personal experiences. In that manner dance was a methodology – one might say a feminine methodology – which gave space to the body and to emotions.

The differentiation between knowledge and belief is implicitly connected to the distinction between science and religion. Traditionally within anthropology of religion, this distinction was at the same time what differentiated 'us', the scientist, from 'them', our informants. Whereas 'we' have knowledge based on objective reflectivity, 'they', coming from a worldview based on religion and magic, have belief (Overing 1993:3). Even though their belief might have its own rationality, as Evans-Pritchard for example illustrated in his seminal work on witchcraft of the Azande (Evans-Pritchard 1963), still *our* knowledge is the truth in terms of what is the reality of things. The differentiation between science/knowledge and religion/belief is thus based on a differentiation on the level of ontology between an objective reality and an imaginary world.

Anthropologists have most often approached religion at the level of how it is practiced, namely through religious rituals (Eriksen 1998:297). Religious rituals are then seen as the dramatic element of religion. However, we should be careful to assume that ritual is an expression of a belief already

there. From that vantage I do not only see Bharatanatyam as a representation of a Hindu worldview. On the contrary I claim that Bharatanatyam is a practice, generating a experiences of different levels of the relationship between human and divine beings, out of which a sense of one's position in cosmos develops. In order to understand just parts of the complexity of this relationship I need to give some more detaills about the dance itself.

Dancing with Krishna

The Devdasis' dance developed as part of the *Bhakti movement* that appeared during the 8th century AD in South and East India. The Bhakti movement was an alternative to the Vedic order of the Brahmin priests, as devotees could reach the divine directly by establishing an emotional relationship to gods and goddesses. *Bhakti* is translated as devotion (Fuller 2004:155). Emphasis was placed on the arts as a path to the divine. In the 18th century when the Devadasi tradition was at its highest, music compositions were created on the basis of Bhakti poetry describing the relationship between a god and devotee, compositions which still form a basis of the bharatanatyam dance today.

In bhakti-poetry the god is addressed in a devotional manner. The idea that one can reach the divine through devotion was preached by *Krishna* in the *Bhagvad Geeta*[1]. This levelled devotion and emotion with the textual knowledge of the Brahmin priests. Today the principle of bhakti is integrated into general Hindu practices.

The bhakti-poetry is written by men, however, the narrator is a first-person female. The poems are about a *nayika* (heroine) longing for her beloved Lord, the *nayaka* (hero), who in many cases is *Krishna*. Dancers explained to me that the intensity of the ultimate longing to unite with with the divine is best compared with a female's longing for her beloved. In the movements, the dancers perform both the part of the nayika and nayaka, but with a focus put on the nayika (female devotee).

In the poems and in the dance, the primary emotion is *sringara-bhakti* translated as devotional love. One dancer illustrated what this means in the following quote:

1 This was the only text I heard the dancers refer to when trying to explain their belief. The Bhagvad Geeta exists as part of the important Indian epic, the Mahabharata. It stands out from the rest of the story as it is written in poetic language. The Bhagvad Geeta is translated as 'the Lord's song' and consists of the words song by Krishna as he manifested himself on earth to his devotee Arjuna at a battlefield (Dowson 1984:43).

> You cannot show bhakti separately and love separately. For me bhakti comes because of love (...) when you take bhakti the love goes to the god. So when you are performing, when you are expressing yourself to the god it is not only love. Because he is beyond everything worldly, normal love is not there, it is bhakti. Like spirituality is involved with love. It is not only love, it is spiritual love.

To understand this spiritual love it is necessary to have a sense of the nature of Krishna. Krishna is considered to be the 8th incarnation (*avatar*) of Vishnu, born on earth to save humanity from evil (Dowson 1984:160). As a child he was extremely naughty, but was still adored by everyone around him. As an adult he became something of a lady charmer, and all the milkmaids (*gopikas*) in his village were in love with him. In a popular image of Krishna, he is in the woods dancing with each and every gopika, all simultaneously. This is said to illustrate that he had the power for each person to feel his presence at the same time. Most dancers will explain how Krishna has become their favorite god after learning dance items like varnams and padams that involve Krishna. One dancer gave the following reason for Krishna being her favorite god:

> Krishna, he is more worldly, he enjoys life. Rama [7th avatar of Vishnu] is so idealistic, I don't want to be too idealistic. Vishnu and Shiva you cannot approach you can only praise them, you cannot be one with them. I can imagine playing with Krishna, I cannot imagine playing with Shiva.

In playing with Krishna and by showing him spiritual love a separation between the worldly and the divine is bridged. Durkheim not only divided the world into the sacred and the profane, but also the human being itself. In his theory on religion, the soul is associated with the sacred and the body with the profane (Durkheim 1915:262), which to a great extend is a mirror of a dominant Christian cosmology at the time of writing. However, playing with Krishna or showing love for Krishna is not an act of a soul existing independent of the body, rather the emotions are deeply rooted in the body.

In dances based on bhakti poetry (e.i. *varnam* items), the dancer starts by illustrating a single paragraph or sentence from a poem (referred to as a 'line'). Then this line is repeated several times in the song. As the line is repeated the dancer "leaves" the language of that line and dances another scene, where the same kind of emotions are felt. One dancer gave me the following example to illustrate how. The line is of a poem describing how a *nayika* (heroine) saw a reflection of Krishna in the water and looked back and saw that he was not there. After having danced that situation, the dancer can choose to dance a scene where she sees the light of Krishna in the woods and afterwards realizes that it is the light of the moon. As an experienced dancer you are free to work with different elaborations.

Another way of elaborating on the above line can be in showing varying emotions that can be felt in that same situation. The dancer can show how the glimpse of Krishna in the water brought happiness knowing that he pays attention to her. She also can redo that situation by showing the sorrow she feels as she realizes that Krishna is not there. Or she can show the jealousy she feels, because she believes that Krishna only pays attention to her for such a short time compared to other devotees. All these are thought of as different aspects of one's feelings for the god. The cyclical nature of the elaborative dance is a way of deepening one's feelings for the god and the longing to be united with the divine. This is conceptualized as a longing of the soul. One of the dancers described:

> The *nayika* represents the atma, the individual soul, which wants the union with the *parmatma*, which wants the union with the god.

The Sanskrit word for soul, *atma* has two meanings: individual soul and supreme soul. This is an interpretation related to the Vedanta philosophy. Vedanta is among the most influential branches of Indian spiritual philosophy. It is associated with the *Upanishads* scriptures in which the divine is represented through a poetic form in a mystical as well as monistic way. In this philosophy the atma or supreme soul is one single entity residing in each being. Yet, in day-to-day life the atma is divided, as people do not realize the unity. Therefore the supreme soul has been given its own name, the *parmatma* (Sahay 1998:70). According to Vedanta, the goal of human existence is its absorption into the supreme soul of the universe (Dowson 1984:81). The method for this, is by looking inward, in order to realize how one's own soul is connected to the divine soul. The dancers likewise expressed that the dance is a method of realizing this relationship:

> (...) the union is not going to happen one fine day when the parmatma from there and the atma from here and there is a clash. No we all know that is not what we mean. What we mean is the realization of

the god within you (...) Bharatanatyam is a mean to experience the divine within you.

I assert that to experience the divine within in Bharatanatyam comes from embodying the gods and goddesses and from feeling a strong emotional bond with these. Also as a dancer one experiences a physical strength in one's body that grows along with the dance practice. In extraordinary situations this is felt as an indefinite power, which may open up to divine bliss. The experience of bliss is a long chapter in itself. In the following I wish to focus how the dance as a spiritual practice can empower female dancers.

The spiritual veil

In theatre, according to Hastrup, there is always implicitly an 'other' present when acting (Hastrup 2004a:74). Even when rehearsing, actors are constantly aware that they are being watched. The audience when dancing Bharatanatyam is not just the gods and goddesses, but their family and friends, and society in general. Actions (including dance) are always relational, as one acts (and dances) with an awareness of the presence of others.

Michael Jackson uses the word intersubjectivity to denote the existential condition of both being a subject for oneself and being and object for others (Jackson 2002:30)[2]. My attention here is on the aspects of intersubjectivity directly related to the female body. I am interested in the tension between the personal experience of the sexed moving body, and one's moving body as a gendered object to others.[3]

Within feminist theories, the female body as an object to men's gaze has been vividly discussed. Less attention seem to be given to the subjective experiences of the female body. Mary John, who focus on women in India, has pointed out that most studies on this segment are ignoring female subjectivities and desires because they are only focused on the subordination of women in relation to men (John 2002:23). In line with this, Edwin Ardener identified the real 'problem of women' as a consequence of the difficulty in getting women's version of the world (Ardener 2001). The dance practice,

2 Jean-Paul Sartre is probably best known for pointing out the condition of being both a subject and an object (Østerberg 1996). However, Jackson declares his main inspiration to be Hannah Arendt with her distinction between the private self and the public persona (Jackson 2002:2).

3 Here I will not elaborate on the theoretical discussion on the relationship between sex and gender, but I used the distinction here to illustrate the difference between having a biological body, and the values attached by others to that body as a consequence of its sex (Eriksen 1998:153).

however, provided me with a unique entrance into female subjectivity in India, which did not only came from listening to what they had to say, but also to share a part of their lives which they had chosen for themselves.

In a book on the relationship between dance, sexuality and gender, Judith Hanna Lynn argues that Bharatanatyam is a way of encoding female subordination, since the devotional aspects of the dance embrace female inferiority (Hanna 1988:109). According to Hanna, when learning the dance the female dancer through her body incorporates and naturalizes a subordinate position in relation to men. A dancer who had read Hanna's text told me:

> It [Hanna's text] is pathetic! You can easily see that she has not learned the dance herself!

The dancers again and again objected to the way they as Indian women have been defined by Western people as oppressed. This, I believe to some extend has to do with the expereince of empowerment in dance. The empowerment as I see it is related to the spirituality of the dance at two levels. At one level the sprituality 'protects' them from society moralities, and at another level the expereinces of being in touch with the divine gives them a certain power, which 'spills' over to their life in general, also when not dancing.

Stepping out of the dance Institute, the noise, dust, and heat of Delhi always hit me in the face. What struck me even more was the fact that I was under the observation of the millions of people (as well as animals) populating the streets. In the Institute, I could observe myself and move my body freely. Outside the Institute, I was the object of the gaze of others and had to follow the unwritten rules of how to move in the streets. In public I tried to hide parts of my body behind my scarf and I avoided eye contact with men. The peace that I had reached with the dance practice was broken. The difference between inside and outside the Institute was reflected in the way the dancers used their bodies. They would go from an over-expressive, to a more self-protective way of moving.

In a study on love poetry in a Bedouin society, Abu-Lughod has argued that poetry existing in the private sphere represents an opportunity for women to express personal experiences that otherwise violate the male-dominated public discourse. In the poems personal experiences of erotic love are 'recasted' as socially shared experience (Abu-Lughod 1986:239). In

that way, messages that contravene the official discourse are *veiled* through convention and tradition (Abu-Lughod 1986:239).

Similarly to the Bedouin love poetry, I suggest that Bharatanatyam is a way of veiling an expressiveness of the body as the dancer has an opportunity to move her body in a sensual way otherwise not accepted. In Bharatanatyam the expressiveness is not verbal but corporeal. The point is that with their dance, they may express a desire for love that they cannot otherwise verbalize in a public context where premarital love is not accepted. Most of the dancers are given the choice to find their own husbands out of love, but they cannot make their love public until they have decided to marry. Others were choosing to have an arranged marriage.

Abu-Lughod uses the public/private differentiation as a way of overcoming the one-sided view upon women's subordination. She argues that the power structure is dependent on space, thus in the private sphere one can evade the male-dominated discourse of the public space. As a performing Bharatanatyam dancer, the dancer is displaying her body in the public space of the auditoriums. Therefore public space cannot simply be equated with a dominant discourse in which women are repressed.[4] For example, in the public places around the new shopping malls in Delhi, young women walk around in tank tops while holding their boyfriends hand. The way the females display their bodies through clothes and movements is dependent on context rather than the difference between public and private sphere. Therefore we need another framework than the private-public continuum, in order to understand how females create spaces for intimacy.

I suggest that Bateson's concept of play and frame is a way of understanding the veil of dance, without it being dependent on a private setting. I see dance as a certain frame that is set apart from the social relations of everyday life, and at the same time embedded in it. According to play is distiguished from non-play through meta-communication establishing a frame of play. The frames seldom exist alone. Most often there will be double frames or frames within frames (Bateson 1972:188). In the case of Bharatanatyam a frame communicating that 'this is divine' encircles the frame 'this is dance'.

Anne Marie Gaston, a sociologist as well as a Bharatanatyam dancer, has argued that the desire for the spirituality of Bharatanatyam is actually a desire for social acceptance. She claims that if the dance had not been acknowledged as a spiritual practice, it would not have been accepted because

4 I will not go into a discussion on the public discourse on women in India. My focus is not in the verbalized positioning of women. What I am interested in is the experience of women moving in space. What I identify here is simply the difference in experience dependent on context.

of its erotic content (Gaston 1996:313). I would not go that far. However, the fact that the dance is presented to a public as a highly spiritual practice creates a veil around the dancers. Initially, this social acceptance related to the spiritual content of the dance is needed for the dancers to be able to dance. As a dancer explained:

> Krishna Iyer made the dance respected. I am grateful to him. If it wasn't for him I might not be dancing because those are the conditions we have to live in.

Krishna Iyer was one of those partaking in the re-invention of Bharatanatyam around the 1940s, when the dance went from a devalued dance of the Devdasis to a cherished dance of the middle class. Part of this reinvention was the establishment of a direct connection between the dance and Indian spiritual philosophy. According to Schechner, this re-invention was a 'restoration of behavior' of an imagined past through a conformity to classic texts such as the Natya Sastra (Schechner 1985:69). In this process, the ancient dance was created through the present dance and *not* the other way around (ibid.). As the newly restored dance corresponded to the sacred texts, the dance became not only accepted but also respected.

Frames should also be understood in a spatial manner. Upon entering one of the auditoriums around New Delhi staging Bharatanatyam dance performances, it felt like entering a little oasis compared to the life in the Delhi streets. There were *mandalas* made of flowers on the floor, and the women present were all dressed up in their finest saris and jewelry. Referring back to de Certeau, spaces are practiced places (de Certeau 1984:117). If we combine this theory of space with Bateson's theory of frames, I argue that through the practice of place, spaces are framed. In the auditoriums, a metamessage is communicated through the movement in place "saying" that everything that happens within this space is divine (cf. Bateson 1972:188). This is communicated/practiced for example as a dancer enters the place of the stage and she does the exact same thing with her body as entering a Hindu temple. Rather than being a matter of private and public space, I believe the dancers as performers move in public spaces that are framed as a dance space, and at the same time a divine space. Frames thus may serve as veils. Within this spatial frame, the dancer can move in sensual ways that are not appropriate in most contexts.

One dancer told me that she had rejected an offer to dance at a restaurant since there was no stage, and therefore felt that she was not properly

separated from the audience. In other words, the space in public was not properly framed and thereby a veil did not protect her. In addition, I was told how one dancer had performed outside an auditorium in a village-area, for people who had not seen such a performance before. The dancer had become quite scared, when out of excitement the audience had been screaming and clapping during the performance. The audience through their practice also partakes in framing the space. Because the audience did not frame the space properly, she could not enjoy the dance, as she felt vulnerable.

Overcoming the problem of dance

Even when the dancer is performing for a "proper" audience, she might be respected as a dancer, but not necessarily as a social person. Dancers explained how they felt that people generally thought of them as dancers with a lot of respect. Yet, the same people would not want a performing dancer as a wife or daughter-in-law. It is not dancing as such that might be considered against the moral code, but it is dancing in public space. One dancer explained to me that her boyfriend had told that in case they got married, he would support her in opening a dance school where she could teach and perform. However, he would not allow her to dance outside her dance school. Several dancers told me that they thought that Bharatanatyam is mostly respected as a kind of cultural education for young females, but not as a lifestyle.

In her study on dance in Northern Greece, Jane Cowan argues that females encounter dance as pleasure, but also as a problem. Therefore dancing is an ambiguous experience for the female dancer (Cowan 1990:188). In the dance, she is encouraged to act in ways she would otherwise not do in public, yet, "letting go" is viewed upon with suspicion. Her sexual expressivity though valued within the dance, is a central issue for other people in defining her as a social person in a context in which these movements are not accepted (Cowan 1990:190).

I have encountered several studies on Indian women that stress their ambiguous position in the social structure. This is being related to the position of Hindu goddesses who are both seen as fertile and destructive (Trawrick 1996), and also to the family structure of India, in which women are split between loyalties towards natal and conjugal ties (Raheja & Gold 1996). The claimed repression of Indian women has been interpreted as a consequence of men's attempt to control these ambiguities (ibid.). In addition, dancing women have been seen as ambiguous, because they are being

associated with divinity as well as prostitution since they historically have been both temple and court dancers (Gaston 2005).

As part of the revival of the dance, dancers tried to come to terms with the ambiguity associated with the dance by downplaying sringara (erotic love) and instead focus more on bhakti (devotion) (Gaston 1996:89). This started a debate between the Bharatanatyam dancers Rukimini Devi and T. Balaraswati (ibid.). Rukimini Devi was a Brahmin woman connected to the theosophical society who opened the first dance institute in Madras. She designed the dress used today for performances, revealing less skin than the Devdasis did, while stressing the spiritual potentiality of the dance. T. Balaraswati on the other hand came from a Devdasi community. She called for a continuation of the Devdasi dance as it had developed through centuries both as a temple dance and as a court dance. Their discussion focused on whether something spiritual could also be erotic. Devi was skeptical towards it while Balaraswati stressed that there in India had always been such a connection between spirituality and sexuality, most known example being the *Kama Sutra* (Gaston 1996:91).

The dancers from the dance Institute did not distance themselves from the Devdasis despite their function in the courts. Interestingly, they seemed to glorify them and even ascribe them with 'purity'. This was not through a concealment of the part of their history that took place in the courts, but rather through an acknowledgment of the dual role as both temple and court dancers. One dancer gave this explanation for the dual role:

> We cannot neglect the whole female sexuality and female desires (...) I feel that it is quite true that the Devdasis pampered themselves to satisfy that part of their female part. They probably got so much in love with God, all the stones [statues of gods] that the devotion came to such an extreme that it became love and they started performing.

That Devdasi were devoted to God and were feeling human love at the same time is not seen as a contradiction, but as a natural development. The Devdasis are thus recognized as both spiritual and social beings. One dancer told that she thought that in the courts, the human needs for love and sex were satisfied for the Devdasi through her relationship to her Patron. Here, the dancer rejects the idea that the dance in courts was only for the pleasure of men and that the dance was a means of exploitation. By claiming that dancing in courts was also a pleasure for the dancers, they are holding on to themselves as subjects. I believe that through the interpretations of the

Devdasis, the dancers take an active role in defining themselves as dancers of the present.

Spirituality and eroticism is not experienced as a contradiction for the dancers. In a spiritual practice, through their bodies the dancers relate to others who are an object of their love. The desire for unity thus involves eroticism. Just as we cannot separate the dance from life in general, we cannot separate the personal life of the dancers from their spiritual life. A dancer described how this is fused in the dance when she was talking about a performance she did:

> (...) at that time I had a huge crush on this guy. So before going on stage I looked at an image of Krishna and I imagined that it was that guy. After that I really did well.

The dancer did not look at a picture of the guy, but at a picture of Krishna, because in the dance the love for a human being may fuse with the love for god. As discussed above in relation to the bhakti dance items, the dancer as a devotee has to show devotional or spiritual love (sringara bhakti). However, the gods themselves show a very human love for each other. Therefore, in enacting the gods, the differentiation between worldly and spiritual love is fused. As explained by one dancer:

> The love for Radha [Krishna's mistress] that Krishna has, that kind of love only we [people] are having. It is very much worldly love, it is not spiritual love.

Because they are acting the love between the gods in the dance, the dancers are showing a worldly love. The wordly love is a love of the gods and therefore it is at the same time divine love.

I noticed how the dancers themselves were strict judges towards other dancers, when they thought that they were showing their desires for love in a too human way. In that case they would think of them as 'vulgar' as opposed to the good dancers who were 'subtle' and 'cute'. According to Cowhan drawing on Foucault, the audience through their surveillance of the dancer exercise a kind of control (Cowan 1990:190). Paradoxically, she observes that it is women more than men who are actively judging the young girls if they go too far. Also, according to Cowhan, the female dancer is not just evaluated on her dance, but also on her assumed intentions with her dance. Similarly, the dancers would judge every dancer who they assumed

was motivated by fame and money rather than respect for the art and spiritual development. As judges of the performers, the dancers maintain that a unity of spirituality and eroticism exists. However, it depends on the dancer.

Whereas Greek dancers describe their experiences of dance both as pleasure and problem because of their concern for the audience's opinion, the Bharatanatyam dancers only describe their experiences of dance as '*pure* pleasure' and 'joy'. The dancer tries to free herself from an ambiguity by naturalizing it, thereby purifying the dance. Holding on to the joy of dance is at the same time a way of claiming the authenticity of their own subjective experiences of dancing which are not felt as ambiguous. The dancer thereby insists that she dances for her own pleasure and not as an object for the pleasure of others.

Masculine and feminine strength

Judith Butler has argued that gender is not conditioned by the sexed body but is something performed. Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, defined as a 'process of performativity' (Butler 1998:35-37). What makes her argument interesting in this context, is that the Bharatanatyam dancers do as many male characters as female characters. Therefore, if we follow Butler's logic, they would also become male.

Initially, my assumption was that the dance socialized the dancers according to gender norms of being female in a particular way (Simonsen 2005a). Even though I wanted to prove Hanna wrong in her argument that these norms where categorized by an inequality of gender, I now see that I was indirectly working with the same assumptions, namely that the dance taught the dancers to be *women* in a certain way. In asking questions about how the dance affected them as women, to my surprise, they even rejected gender as a category inscribed in the body. Rather the male and female categories for a dancer had to do with movements and energies. One dancer explained:

> When we perform the male characters we have to take the male characters with us or within us. You cannot say that I am a female taking the masculine. You have to feel now you are a man.

Another one used the concepts of masculinity and femininity, which are not ascribed to the sexed body, when answering my question on how the dance affected her as a woman:

> It is not so much about man and woman in the physical form, it would be more about the feminine and the masculine coming together...it [dance] gives you both powers at the same time, to handle things. One has to learn both female and male roles to be complete.

This completion connected to the practice of both masculine and feminine movements. It is very difficult to distinguish masculinity and feminity in the dance. Masculinty does not necessarily mean hardness but can also be the exercise of full controll, which may be in a very calm way. The feminine on the other hand might be soft, however, when female gods become angry, they become wild because of the lack of the control that the male dogs have. When learning to dance a dance on *Devi*, the consort of Shiva, who takes many forms, one of them Durga, I felt a certain femainine force, which however was felt as being very masculine, as I learned in the dance how to master one of her many weapons. Durga is considered an embodiment of the feminine force, *Shakti*. Several dancers referred to Shakti, when explaining how the dance gave them strength:

> I think basically dance uplifts the person. They say that the power which moves, the power which allows everyone to exist, is the creative power, the power which is associated with Shakti in gods, in their wives. So Shakti represents each and every power, though females are associated with Shakti *only* (laugh), but still that kind of power it comes out while practicing.

Hence, the dancers not only come to terms with their masculine sides, they also feel the strength of their femininity, whether it is embodied in female or male charcters. Therefore, the dancers are far from victims of their gender, rather the dance makes the dancers realize the strength of their sex as well as their abilities of moving beyond the category of the female gender through the refinement of skills.

Returning to Jackson, when taking control over the balance between self as subject and as object, gives an 'existential sense of empowerment' (Jackson 1998:21). Power, according to Jackson, should not be understood in terms of domination (ibid.). Rather, we need to include both the concrete and imaginary levels of human life to understand the meaning of existential empowerment. For example, when a dancer feels connected to Shakti or a masculine energy when dancing, this can be experienced as a kind of empowerment.

Existential empowerment, even though it does not refer to a power in a socioeconomic context, spills over to the socioeconomic life through its impact on the agency of the dancers. This is for example reflected in the choice of a dancer to cancel her engagement upon realizing that the groom once married would not let her perform. The same dancer explained to me how the dance practice had made her develop a sense of independence, and that this gave her the strength to take such a decision. The dancers also have an opportunity to make their dance into their career. Most of the dancers wished to establish a career before they got married and they had no intentions of being housewives like most their mothers were. A career as a dance teacher and performer represents one such oportunity. Yet, the amount of money that one can make in the field is limited, and therefore for the majority this does not translate into economic independence.

Yet, the dance gives the dancers a confidence, as one dancer put it: 'it [the dance practice] does wonders to your confidence'. This confidence begins as a confidence in the body, but it is also felt as a confidence in oneself as a person and as a woman.

Bharatanatyam provided me with a methodology, which I believe was a way of exploring more feminine sites of Hinduism (in line with Durre S. Ahmed's exploration of masculinity and feminity in religions; Ahmed 2002). This was a methodology, which allowed me to use both body, mind and soul. The methodology opened up to an understanding of a group of women in contemporary India, who through dance explore spirituality, which at several levels becomes empowering for them.

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